



# Appendix B: Stoneham Town Center Strategic Action Plan Public Open House Findings October 2014



Prepared for:  
Town of Stoneham  
35 Central Street  
Stoneham, MA 02180

Prepared by:  
Metropolitan Area Planning Council  
60 Temple Place  
Boston, Massachusetts 02111  
Tel (617) 933-0700  
[www.mapc.org](http://www.mapc.org)





## Acknowledgements

This Public Meeting Open House summary was produced as part of the Stoneham Town Center Strategic Action Plan project. Thank you to all who participated throughout the process, in particular, the nearly 85 Stoneham residents who expressed their hopes for the future, and ideas for Town Center, at the event.

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This Open House was staffed by the project Advisory Committee, and MAPC staff, Matthew Smith, Senior Regional Planner; Steve Winter, Economic Development Manager; and Christine Madore, Associate Planner.

### **Metropolitan Area Planning Council**

#### **Officers**

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Thank you for the assistance and leadership of the following individuals:

### **Town of Stoneham**

David Ragucci, Town Administrator

Stoneham Town Center Advisory Committee



## Overview


The Town of Stoneham, Stoneham Town Center Advisory Committee and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) held an Open House public meeting on Wednesday, October 1, 2014 to engage the larger Stoneham community and receive input for the Stoneham Town Center Vision & Action Plan. The over 85 people in attendance provided many thoughts, opinions and guidance about the future of the Town Center area. During the meeting, attendees accomplished the following:

- viewed a narrated presentation highlighting findings from the existing conditions and market study work done to date;
- provided input about Stoneham Town Center's strengths, weaknesses and opportunities;
- identified potential strategic priorities to energize and improve the center; and
- created visual preference collages to highlight future development and activities most desired in Stoneham Town Center.

Participants at the event were actively engaged in the process. After providing feedback at the programmed stations, many participants remained – for an hour or more - to discuss the ongoing planning process with Advisory Committee members, Town officials, and other local residents. And although MAPC were on hand to answer questions, the Advisory Committee volunteers were front and center, taking the lead in discussing key findings, describing the plan process, leading participants through the Open House stations, and discussing next steps.

A complete summary of the open house is provided below. The greatest takeaways from the evening were that Stoneham has a very engaged citizenry committed to improving the Town Center area. Specifically, there was widespread support for numerous improvements and amenities within the Town Center including a greater variety of shops, restaurants and activities; the desire for more attractive signage and streetscapes; the need for a comprehensive marketing strategy or “brand” to create “buzz” and draw more people to the area (both locally and from surrounding towns), more public transportation options to make the area more accessible and convenient, and more activities for both adults and children. The desire for a realistic, achievable set of strategies to improve and energize the area was also emphasized.

**STONEHAM TOWN CENTER  
VISION & ACTION PLAN**



**OPEN HOUSE**

Provide your input to help shape the community's vision for economic development and growth in Stoneham's Town Center.

**Wednesday, October 1**

Stoneham Town Hall - Banquet Hall (Lower Level)  
35 Central Street  
6:00 – 9:00pm

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The Town of Stoneham and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) are holding an Open House public meeting to gather community input about the Stoneham Town Center Vision and Action Plan.

Drop in at your convenience to:

- Provide opinions that will help MAPC and the Town to develop and prioritize community and economic development goals and strategies.
- Participate in mapping and visual preference exercises that will help to prioritize new opportunities for retail, housing, office and improved transportation connections in the Town Center.
- View findings from the Market Analysis and Existing Conditions Report completed by MAPC.
- Ask questions of staff.

An overview presentation will kick off the event and will be replayed throughout the evening to accommodate schedules.

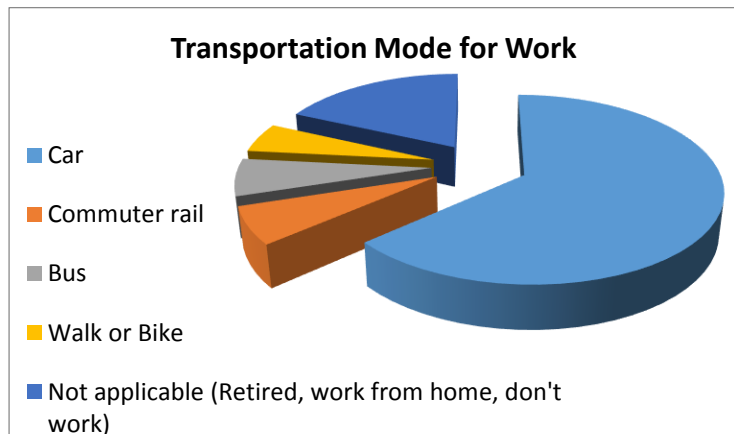
# Open House Summary

Meeting attendees provided feedback to the planning team through a series of topical “stations” where specific input was sought through participatory exercises. A summary of each station and findings obtained is provided below.

## Station 1: Where do you live and work?

At Station 1, participants were asked to locate where they lived and worked, and the mode or modes of transportation used to get to work. As shown in the following figures and charts, the meeting attracted people from all areas of Stoneham, and a few from surrounding communities.

Over 40 percent of attendees worked in Stoneham, with 20% commuting to Boston, 5% to Medford, and over a third to other areas of the region. As expected in a community with limited public transit options, the majority of attendees drove to work. However, 14 percent took public transit (bus or commuter rail), and 5% walked or rode a bike. The mode of commuting was not relevant to nearly 20% of attendees, who were either retired or were not currently working.

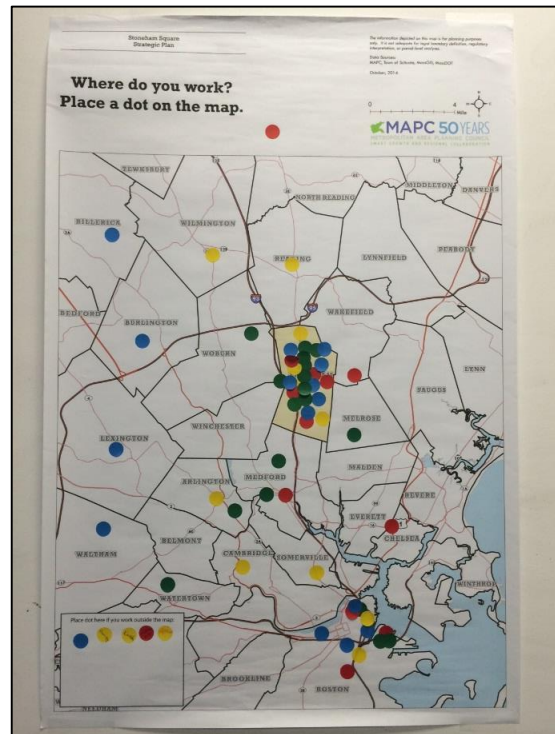


**Figure: Home and Work Locations of Participants**

**Question: Where do you live?**



**Question: Where do you work?**



## Station 2: Overview Presentation

After identifying where each meeting participant lived and worked, the next station allowed attendees to view a pre-recorded presentation that highlighted the many findings from the residential and retail market analysis work and additional existing conditions research. The presentation provided current and valuable information about Town Center (and town wide) demographics and economic trends, existing retail and future potential, and residential demand and market segments for new housing units by 2030.

MAPC staff was present to answer questions before, during or following the presentation.



## Station 3: Strengths, Weaknesses and Opportunities

Following the presentation, the next engagement station asked participants to state what they liked most about Stoneham Town Center (“Strengths”), what they liked least (“Weaknesses”) and what they felt would improve the area most (“Opportunities”). Each participant received three forms (one for strengths, one for weaknesses, and one for opportunities), which they filled out and placed on a board. Answers posted to the wall spurred many discussions about the area and its future. A summary of their thoughts is provided below:

### Strengths

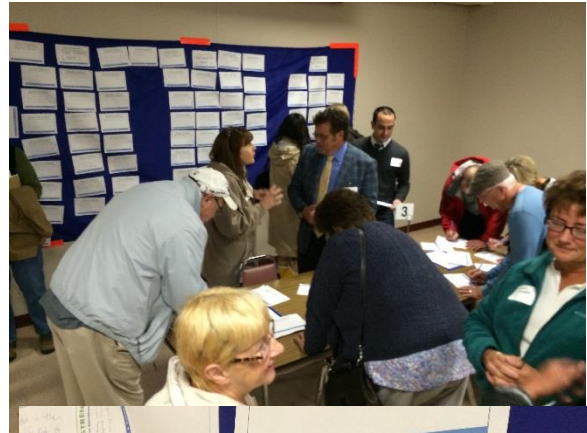
Open House attendees felt the Town Center area has numerous strengths already in place. The most common strengths were the presence of the Stoneham Theater, the Town Common and the overall character of the area with its many institutions (Town Hall, Library, Post Office, etc.) – it feels like a Town Center. Many also mentioned particular businesses they liked, the walkable feel of the area, and its access to major highways and Boston.

A sample of comments as they were given is provided below in a list:

- Restaurant and Theater
- Great neighborhoods and people, location, zoo, access to Boston. Theater!
- This meeting! Having a group or a team that is invested in improving its area is a major plus. Stoneham has the basic footprint. All it needs, is some thoughtful consideration to create something unique and special.
- Beautiful green space at Town Common. Centrally located town hall, library, police, fire dept., post office, easy access to major highways, theater.



- Live theater, good restaurants, town common.
- Compact & full of good restaurants.
- Location! Book Oasis, great institutions (town soccer, town day).
- It is attractive and has a lot of potential.
- Look and feel of downtown - historic, character.
- Architecture of some of the buildings.
- Theater, library.
- Charming, walkable, historic, family friendly.
- Town common, theater, accessibility to highways.
- Proximity to Boston, charm.
- People - the people of this community care. Proximity to Boston and 128/93 interchange.
- Theater is a great attraction.
- Theater, Evergreen Florist, J&B Butcher
- Walkability (actually the whole town not just center), including town green.
- Location, multiple uses, business residential + entertainment (restaurants, theatre).
- Different restaurants, flower barrels, new median strip bushes, theater, wine & cheese shop.



## Weaknesses

Many of the weaknesses identified were closely aligned to the strengths. Beyond those businesses identified (theater, butcher, book store, etc.), most felt the area lacked sufficient shopping or restaurant options (too many nail salons and pizza shops), few nightlife and entertainment options to draw people to the Town Center, and traffic was a major concern. Many also noted that the area is unattractive or looks dated – particularly the entry corridors, that it lacks public transportation options, and that there is a lack of communication about Town Center and resources available to make it better.

A sample of the many comments is provided below:

- No other reason to go to downtown other than theater, Library and Common.
- Building facades look dated and tired; get rid of flower barrels and outdated lightning
- Not enough diverse restaurants; NE walk through/ bike through traffic; NE retail.
- Need to attract more people to come and stop there. Utilize the common more. More public transportation.

- The sense thing are fine in the way they are; access to public transit; provincialism and complacency in vision; no good coffee!
- Lack of a variety businesses too many of same thing – pizza, nails, hair or attorneys. Weeds growing through sidewalks and flower beds makes us look neglected. It is embarrassing!
- Parking
- Traffic speeds thru too fast; not sufficient public transportation. Bus but no commuter or T; too many run down properties within steps of the square.
- No diversity of shopping opportunities/ establishments.
- Restrictive zoning makes it almost impossible to change anything.
- Need more public transportation. A bus route to the red line would be great.
- Lack of community involvement, parking, locations to build new retail; reputation.
- Lack of places to come and hang out. Not a lot of communication from the town to let people know what is going on. Email blast, websites, "wiki". Events page online. Tourist guide. What is here?
- Hard to walk, traffic problems, "drive through", hard to park, lack of nightlife, quality businesses (restaurants, coffee shops) not quaint (atmosphere lack)
- Apart from restaurants, there is very little to attract people looking to shop, gather, or socialize. The "Common" is a parking lot covered with grass.
- Lacking activities in the evening, unsightly and empty buildings, no signage uniformity downtown.
- Lack of continuity among buildings. Color, style etc.; lack of parking.
- We need more stores, cafés, shops, etc. there are too many empty buildings /stores.
- Absence of higher end retail + restaurants; Run down high school facility.
- Not enough restaurants/night life. Area could use some updating; more kid friendly areas.
- no night life & entertaining possibilities; not very vibrant; better public transit;

## Opportunities

In summary, the most common opportunities identified were more restaurants and retail establishments, including casual cafés and coffee shops; more activities including day and evening options, and improved public realm with more attractive, decorative elements and signage to draw more business to the area.

A sample of participants' comments is provided below:

- Bring in people with more events. Parades, etc.
- Diverse restaurants, walkability, coffee shops / cafes. Attractions that will draw people in. Late-night restaurant/bar that would capture the theater crowd.
- Updating, restaurants, more retail shops. More like surrounding town centers such as Melrose, Winchester.
- A fountain in the Common (for kids to run through) with night lighting.
- Adding more variety of shopping choices. Better public transportation access.
- More types of businesses. Starbucks, a nice pub, a place to hear music, shops. Melrose, Reading and Winchester have great town centers and Stoneham has a much better location to highways.
- Town center, more shops, restaurants, businesses that attract younger people (Starbucks, unique shops - clothing, bread-bakery. Small business. Live music/ cafes. Apartment buildings.
- Better, high end, diverse family friendly restaurants + businesses.
- Beautiful meditation garden in the front lawn of First Congregational Church (by Common).

- More traditional downtown. Get rid of double lines and create more of Main Street.
- Better dining options, possibilities to capture "pass - thru" traffic, location is great for that. A good location have diverse population (age, ethnicity), can be good for a mix of shopping / dining/entertainment.
- We have an open space that could be used for more recreation and beautification. What shall we do with and in front of the New Central Middle School?
- Develop Redstone shopping center. Give people a reason to go to Stoneham Center as a destination - eclectic retail, ice cream store.
- Emphasize the town "square," Main & Franklin area. Maybe even no traffic, but understand it's a state highway. More open areas for sitting outside. Better shops/restaurants?
- Take from Hersam to Maple & Main to Wright by eminent domain - lease back to private dev., angled parking on street, add parking garage with ground floor retail, office or residential above.
- Better retail and restaurants.

## Station 4: Priorities

The next engagement exercise allowed participants to select up to four priorities for the plan to address to improve Stoneham's Town Center. At this station, several boards were displayed with draft priorities developed by MAPC (see images below) based on findings from the market analysis and existing conditions work done to date.

At the station, each participant was given four sticker dots by Advisory Committee members. They were then instructed to review all of the priorities, and then to place their dots on their top four. The number of dots for each was then tabulated by the MAPC planning team. The results are included below. Based on the results, participants felt that improvements to streetscapes and the public realm, more restaurants and cafes, a greater variety of retail options, and public transportation options should be prioritized to improve the Town Center. (The top 4 strategies from the meeting are highlighted with green boxes.)





Other important priorities included the need for a comprehensive marketing strategy to attract more customers to the Town Center, as well as more events, programming, and recreational options. Low on the list was the need for additional housing, pedestrian improvements, and bike amenities and connections from other areas of town.

**Table 1. Station 4: Priorities Results**

#of dots	%	DRAFT PRIORITIES
29	11%	Greater variety of retail options.
33	12%	More restaurants and cafes.
4	2%	More housing options to attract additional residents to the area.
28	10%	More events and programming in the Town Center Area.
33	12%	More public transportations options.
41	15%	Improved streetscape and public realm to make Stoneham Center more attractive and inviting.
11	4%	Safer and improved pedestrian environment.
9	3%	More bike amenities and better connections to and within town center.
24	9%	Additional recreational options to attract residents and visitors to the Town Center.
12	4%	More attractive and effective signage through updated and improved sign regulations.
27	10%	A comprehensive marketing strategy - Stoneham Center "brand" - to attract more customers to area businesses.
20	7%	Make the Town more business friendly.

## Station 5: Visual Preference Exercise

At the fifth and final station, participants were asked to create visual preference collages representing potential development, amenities and activities they would like to see in Stoneham Town Center. The images selected will help the planning team to develop a set of goals, recommendations and strategies to achieve the desired environment depicted in the selected images.

Participants perused hundreds of images depicting different building styles and types (e.g. multi-story mixed-use buildings, single family homes, commercial strip malls), as well as recreational and programming activities including restaurants, active streetscapes, art and music festivals and more. After review, participants selected two images for each collage – two building types and two amenities/activities - they wished to see in Town Center. On each image, participants were encouraged to specifically note what appealed to them within the image.



### **Building Design and Scale**

Many participants indicated the need for a more cohesive built environment within the Town Center area. While many selected images depicting multi-story structures (3-4 stories), they more specifically noted they wanted to see a “nice downtown look” where the “scale is human” including “mixed use with retail at street level” in buildings with “quaint New England style exteriors” including “traditional brick.” Many images were selected more than once. Among the greatest priorities was outdoor seating in front of cafes

### **Retail, Amenities and Activities**

Images selected for the second collage, “Retail, Amenities and Activities” heavily focused on the need for more programming and activity in the town center, including more “hip nightlife” options for adults to “draw more people”, and more recreational or event programming for families, particularly on the Common (e.g. ice skating, movies, etc.). Many wished to see a greater diversity of retail, particularly specialty or “unique shops” as well as a greater variety of restaurants including “unique dining destinations”, and many again calling for outdoor dining options. More public art and creative activities were also highlighted, as were connections to recreational amenities.



**Figure B: Building Design and Scale: Sample Images with Attendee's Quotes**



"Scale is human"  
 "Mixed streetscape – not just a place to drive through.  
 Mixed building appearance."



"Clean, colonial."  
 "Nice looking area to shops and live above."



"Friendly, lively."  
 "Outdoor seating. Walkable square with something  
 worth walking to."



"Place for people to congregate and meet."  
 "Attractive city scape."



"Modern, clean, feels younger. Mix of retail."  
 "Attractive storefronts. Trees enhance the beauty."



"Colonial structures befitting the town."  
 "Looks doable and realistic reach for Stoneham."



**Figure C: Retail, Amenities and Activities – Sample Images with Attendees’ Quotes**



“Draw diverse shopping experience.”  
“Unique shops.”



“Draw – nightlife.”  
“Good nightlife activity. Robust exciting upscale food and drink. Good socializing environment.”



“This looks superfun. I want a beer and a brush!”  
“Personal growth, education, fun adult activities – always have to go to another town.”



“Farmers market.”  
“Farmer’s market, CSA pick up brings community together.”



“Health. Outdoor rink on the Common.”  
“Recreation on the Square – family oriented.”



“Attractive outdoor dining.”  
“Café and casual restaurant outdoor seating.”

